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ABSTRACT

The etymology of the word "OK" has been controversial from the time it was coined. As an acronym, it is ambiguous by its nature. It was originally meant to stand for "oll korrect," a deliberate misspelling of "all correct." These misspellings were a fad among the literati in late 1930s Boston. However, the phrase was soon adopted as an abbreviation for the nickname "Old Kinderhook" by Democrats campaigning for Martin Van Buren's reelection in 1840. Since then, several other theories have been introduced, including the ideas that it came from a Choctaw Indian word meaning "it is so" or a Middle English word for the last load of a harvest. Most dictionaries now acknowledge its source in "oll korrect" or some variation, with later adoption by the Van Buren campaign and subsequent popular recognition. A 29-item bibliography is included. (MSE)

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Historical Evidence on the Etymology of "OK"

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Abstract: The etymology of the word "OK" has been controversial virtually from the time it was coined. As an acronym, the word by its very nature is ambiguous. It originally was meant to stand for "oll korrect;" a deliberate misspelling of "all correct;" these misspellings were a fad among the literati in late 1830's Boston. However, the phrase was soon adopted by the Democrats who were campaigning Martin Van Buren for re-election in 1840. Since then, several other theories have been introduced. Some can still be found in dictionaries today, and although it is generally accepted among linguists that OK originally stood for "oll korrect," dictionaries and linguistic texts do not reflect this consensus.

Few words in the English language have been subject to as much speculation as to their origin than the phrase "OK." It has been attributed to Presidents Martin Van Buren (Evans and Evans, 1957) and Andrew Jackson (Mencken, 1937), a port in Haiti (Morris and Morris, 1977), or Puerto Rico (Hedberg, 1983), languages of Africa (Cassidy, 1981) Scotland (Greco, 1975) and Native Americans (McKnight, 1925), and a playful deliberate misspelling of another English phrase (Read, 1963b). Although it is generally agreed upon by linguistic scholars that the last is almost certainly the true origin of OK, to this day dictionaries are not in agreement as to its etymology.

The recent history of ascribing etymology to OK is as interesting as the etymology itself. It began in 1941, with an essay presenting "evidence" on the history of OK in the form of historical citations. Allen Walker Read, in his first of many papers on the phrase (1941), quotes from Boston newspapers from 1840, giving "proof" that OK originally stood for Old Kinderhook, Martin Van Buren's nickname (he was born in Kinderhook, NY). In a political fervor to stir up support for Van Buren's reelection, the story goes, semi-secret social clubs were formed to further this end. Meetings of these clubs were announced in newspapers;

advertisements with the letters "O.K." in large print. This, Read concludes, is where OK came from.

The embarrassing truth is that Read's exhaustive research was not exhaustive enough. His "arch-enemy" discovered references dated a year earlier which show OK standing for "oll korrect," a deliberate comical misspelling of "all correct" (Thomason, 1993). No one can dispute the clear references to Van Buren's political campaign in most instances of OK; however, the campaign did not invent the phrase.

OK was the product of two fads that existed in Boston in the 1830s. One was the deliberate misspelling of words in phrases such as, for instance "no use," into "Know Yuse." The second was the encrypting phrases into their initials ("G.T.D.H.D." had to be explained by the editor as meaning "give the devil his due"). Thus, "no use" becomes "K.Y." In order to understand what K.Y. meant, one had to be in on the joke that "no use" could be and was commonly being misspelled "know yuse," and further one had to realize that in a particular instance, that the author of the passage being read in fact meant to say "no use." (Read, 1963a). OK, then, is the abbreviated corrupted spelling of "all correct."

Read later corrected his original paper's conclusion that OK originally stood for Old Kinderhook, pointing out this Bostonian fad (1963a), but in the intervening 22 years, the confusion regarding this phrase is evidenced in the varied etymologies which one finds in different dictionaries.

Origins: A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English (Partridge, 1958) agrees with Read's 1941 argument that OK stands for Old Kinderhook.

The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology (Ontions, 1966) sticks itself firmly in the Old Kinderhook camp.

A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the English Language (Klein, 1967) states that OK was "probably" derived from the Choctaw Indian word *okeh*, meaning "it is so."

An Etymological Dictionary of Modern English (Weekley, 1967) departs from the crowd, stating that OK stood for *orl korrect* in the U.S. since 1790.

The American Heritage Dictionary of English (1969) lists the origin of OK as "probably" standing for Old Kinderhook, Martin Van Buren's nickname during the 1840 presidential campaign. However, the dictionary also mentions that the word was "previously attested in the 1830s to a favorable but uncertain meaning."

The New Webster Encyclopedic Dictionary of the English Language (Thatcher, 1970) states OK derived from Old Kinderhook in 1840.

Random House College Dictionary (Urdang, 1973) ascribes OK to Old Kinderhook, Van Buren's nickname, but recommends the reader to compare it to the "Bostonian phrase *all correct*".

Funk and Wagnalls Standard College Dictionary (1974) takes a very diplomatic stance, saying the origin is unknown, "perhaps" from *oll korrect*, then "reinforced" by Old Kinderhook.

Webster's II New Riverside Dictionary (1984) declares the origin is "probably" an abbreviation of *oll korrect*.

Webster's Third International Dictionary of the English Language (Gove, 1986) declares OK stands for *oll korrect*.

The Barnhart Dictionary of Etymology (Barnhart, 1988) takes Read's position that OK derived from *oll korrect* and later stood for Old Kinderhook.

The Oxford English Dictionary, Second Edition (Simpson and Weiner, 1989) accepts Read's 1963 conclusion that OK originally stood for *oll korrect*, then was catapulted into everyday usage in the 1840 presidential campaign when the Democrats dubbed Van Buren "Old Kinderhook."

Books devoted to the subject of etymologies are also in great disagreement. "A Dictionary of Modern English Usage" (Fowler 1965) agrees with Read's amended thesis, that the term originally referred to *oll korrect* and was adopted by the Van Buren campaign. The "Dictionary of Word and Phrase Origins" (Morris and Morris, 1977) also agree with Read.

However, "The Story Behind the Word" (Freeman, 1985) still insists OK originally stood for Old Kinderhook, as does "The American Language" (Mencken, 1963). The "Dictionary of Word Origins" (Shipley, 1959) completely ignores Old Kinderhook, and theorizes about a Middle English word *hoacky* or *horkey*, meaning the last load of a harvest!

Yet the evidence holds out that Read was right the second time around. It seems that OK sprung onto the scene on March 23, 1939, in a letter to the editor in the *Boston Morning Post*:

> The above is from the Providence Journal, the editor of which is a little too quick on the trigger, on this occasion. We said not a word about our deputation passing "through the city" of Providence. - We said our brethren were going to New York in the Richmond, and they did go, as per Post of Thursday. The "Chairman of the Committee on Charity Lecture Bells" [Thomas B. Fearing], is one of the deputation, and perhaps if he should return to Boston, via Providence, he of the [Providence] Journal, and his train-band, would have the "contribution box," et cetera, *o.k.* - all correct - and cause the corks to fly, like sparks, upward.

The author of this letter, the noted wit Charles Gorden Greene, clearly meant for readers to interpret o.k. "oll korrect," following the craze of the day to misspell and then initialize common phrases - the "Initial Language" (Benjamin and Griswold, 1839, quoted in Read, 1963a).

It seems that the etymologies which have OK standing for Old Kinderhook miss the true background of the phrase. "OK" always meant the same as it does

now, but was adopted by the Van Buren campaign. The intensity of the 1840 presidential race carried OK to national recognition, as pointed out by Read (1963b). However, it is important to note that while OK became widely recognizable in reference to Old Kinderhook, the word's semantics retained its original reference to *oll korrect* (Read, 1963c).

Read (1964) waffles a bit on this point, stating what is important is not a word's "true etymology;" its exact origin, but what catapults it to common use. In this light, Old Kinderhook can indeed be said to be what made OK a household word during the heated campaign of 1840. It is what caused OK to be used nationally. Strictly speaking, however, Read blew it in 1941, and his second pass proves to be the more convincing one. Although more people saw OK standing for Old Kinderhook in print, the evidence seems to show that people were used to reading and saying "oll korrect" before Van Buren decided to make a second run for the White House in 1840.

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